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ABSTRACT

This report examines the characteristics of children in the United States who change schools frequently, their success in school relative to children who have never changed schools, and the help that federal educational programs and policies can provide. One in six of the nation's third-graders were found to have changed schools at least three times since beginning first grade. Unless policymakers focus greater attention on the needs of these children, who are often from low-income, migrant, and limited English proficient families, they may continue to be low achieving in math and reading, and they may repeat a grade. The Department of Education (DOE) can play a role in helping mobile children by ensuring that they have access to federally funded educational programs and by encouraging states to implement more effective student record transfer systems. The bulk of the report consists of six appendixes that: (1) describe the characteristics and achievement rates of mobile children; (2) report on a comparison study of two high-mobility rate schools; (3) discuss shortcomings of federal education programs for mobile children; (4) describe a proposed student record system; (5) provide comments from the DOE; and (6) list the major contributors to the report. (MDM)

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Report to the Honorable Marcy Kaptur, House of Representatives

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February 1994

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education

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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Health, Education, and
Human Services Division

B-251230

February 4, 1994

The Honorable Marcy Kaptur
House of Representatives

Dear Ms. Kaptur:

The United States has one of the highest mobility rates of all developed countries; annually, about one-fifth of all Americans move. Elementary school children who move frequently face disruption to their lives, including their schooling. And, sadly, these children are often not helped to adjust to the disruption of a new school—new children, teachers, and principal—and to make sense of the variations in curriculum between the old school and the new. The success of children who change schools frequently may therefore be jeopardized. In addition, as the schools pay greater attention to high academic standards, advocated by national and state leaders,[1] these children may face increased difficulty in achieving success.

In response to these concerns, you asked us to obtain information on children who change schools frequently: (1) their number and characteristics, (2) their success in school relative to children who have never changed schools, (3) the help that federal educational programs, such as Migrant Education and Chapter 1, provide, and (4) the help that improved student record systems could provide.

Results in Brief

One in six of the nation's children who are third-graders[2]—over a half million—have changed schools frequently,[3] attending at least three different schools since the beginning of first grade. Unless policymakers focus greater attention on the needs of children who have changed schools frequently—often low-income, inner city, migrant, and limited English

[1]Early in 1990, President George Bush and the nation's governors agreed to a set of six National Education Goals for the year 2000 concerning (1) readiness for school, (2) graduation from school, (3) academic achievement and citizenship, (4) math and science achievement, (5) adult literacy, and (6) drug- and violence-free schools. The third and fourth goals, in particular, call for high academic standards in certain school subjects.

[2]Our analyses of the Department of Education's Prospects Study data focus on third-graders in school year 1990-91 (see Scope and Methodology, p. 4). We use the term children to refer to these third-graders.

[3]When referring to our analyses of the data from the Prospects Study, we use the term "children who have changed schools frequently" to refer only to third-graders who have attended three or more schools since the beginning of first grade. When not referring to Prospects Study data, we use the term more generally to refer to mobile children.

proficient (LEP)—these children may continue to be low achieving in math and reading, as well as to repeat a grade. Local school districts generally provide little additional help to assist mobile children.

The Department of Education can play a role in helping mobile children to receive appropriate educational services in a timely manner. Specifically, the Department can develop strategies so that all eligible children, including those who have changed schools frequently, will have access to federally funded Migrant Education and Chapter 1 services. Children who have changed schools frequently are not as likely to receive services provided by the federal Migrant Education and Chapter 1 programs as children who have never changed schools.

Timely and comparable record systems could be one way to help mobile children receive services. A child's records often take 2 to 6 weeks to arrive in a new school, according to data collected by the California State Department of Education and others. Moreover, student records often are not comparable across states and districts. The federal Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS), established to transfer information from a migrant child's former school district to a new school district, also does not provide timely and complete information. However, other systems, such as one currently being piloted in a few states, may in the future provide comparable and more timely transfer of student records for all children, including migrants.

Background

High numbers of mobile children, school officials have reported, can interfere with teachers' ability to organize and deliver instruction. While the mobility of children is often a reflection of underlying family issues, such as shortages of affordable housing, changes in marital status, or unemployment, it is the schools that must face the difficult challenge of meeting the educational needs of children who change schools frequently. Teachers may find it difficult to assess the needs of such new children, determine their past educational experiences, and provide instruction that builds on these experiences. These tasks may be especially difficult when many new children enter the classroom throughout the year, often with no advance notice. Children may be exposed to curriculums that vary greatly across schools and districts; therefore, if they move from one school to another in the middle of the school year, they may have difficulty catching up in all subjects by the end of the school year.

Some children who have changed schools frequently may be eligible for federal education programs for reasons other than their mobility. If these children are low achievers, for example, they may be eligible for Chapter 1 services in subjects such as reading and math. In fiscal year 1993, the federal government appropriated over $6.1 billion for school districts to provide supplementary education services to low-achieving children in those schools and grades served by the Chapter 1 program.[4]

Another federal program, the Migrant Education Program, provides services for one group of children who are likely to change schools frequently—children of migrant agricultural workers and fishers. About 440,000 migrant children were provided with educational, medical, or social services through this program, which was funded at about $300 million for fiscal year 1993. The program serves children who are "currently migrant"—those who have moved from one school district to another within the last 12 months—as well as "formerly migrant" children; the latter are eligible to receive services for an additional 5 years after they are no longer categorized as "currently migrant." Under the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, states, in delivering services, are required to give currently migrant children priority over formerly migrant children.[5] A recent House bill proposes to limit migrant education services to migrant children who have changed school districts within the last 2 years.

Recently, the attention of national and state leaders has been focused on meeting the six National Education Goals, including developing and adopting high standards in school subjects for all children. As policymakers have focused on how all children will meet high standards, policymakers have also been examining ways to determine the progress of all children and ensure that they receive the services they need. As one way to determine children's progress, the National Education Goals Panel has recommended a voluntary student record system, which would help to monitor the progress of all children, even if they move among schools. Thus, issues related to the mobility of all children have reached national prominence on the educational policy agenda.

[4]We did not focus on smaller programs that may also serve children who change schools frequently, such as Part A of the Bilingual Education Act program—Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Emergency Immigrant Education Act program, and the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act program.

[5]Unless otherwise noted, the term migrant children applies to both currently and formerly migrant children.

Scope and Methodology

Children's mobility can be measured in different ways, including changes in residence or changes in schools. In our analysis, we focus on the latter. We analyzed data, collected during school year 1990-91 by the Department of Education's Prospects Study,[6] to determine the extent to which children change schools frequently; the characteristics of these children, including their achievement rates; and the help these children receive from federal education programs (see app. I). The study provided nationally representative information on third-graders; about 15,000 third-graders, in 235 elementary schools, and their parents, teachers, and school principals completed questionnaires.

The Prospects Study contained a measure of a child's mobility—the number of schools that a third-grader has attended since the beginning of first grade. This measure allowed us to separate children into three groups. The first group, those who have attended the same school since first grade, we refer to as those who have never changed schools. We also provide information on a second group, those who have attended two schools since first grade. The third group, those who have attended three or more schools since first grade, we refer to as children who have changed schools frequently.

We interviewed officials from the Department of Education's Migrant Education and Chapter 1 programs to examine (1) the extent to which children who have changed schools frequently receive federally funded education program services and (2) the effect changing schools may have on children who are served by these programs.[7] We also met with staff from the National Education Goals Panel and the Council of Chief State School Officers to discuss the development and implementation of the Exchange of Permanent Records Electronically for Students and Schools (ExPRESS) system; through this exchange, elementary and secondary schools, in different localities and states, would be able to voluntarily transfer student records electronically. We interviewed staff, from one state and one district, who are conducting pilots using the ExPRESS system.

To provide examples of how children's mobility may affect their instruction and achievement, we (1) conducted a case study of a school in

[6]The Department of Education provided us with crosstabulation data from its Prospects Study, a congressionally mandated study to determine the short- and long-term consequences of children's participation in the Chapter 1 program.

[7]We use the term Migrant Education Program to refer to services authorized in Part D, Subpart 1, Chapter 1 of Title 1 of the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988. We use the term Chapter 1 to refer to services authorized in Part A, Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies, of Chapter 1.

Maryland with a high rate of mobility and (2) compared our results with a similar case study conducted in California (see app. II). We also reviewed the literature on issues related to frequent school changes and their effects on children.

We conducted our review from January 1992 through September 1993 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Low-Income, Inner City, Migrant, and LEP Children Are More Likely to Have Changed Schools Frequently

Children who are from low-income families or attend inner city schools are more likely than others to have changed schools frequently. Overall, about 17 percent of all third-graders—more than a half million—have changed schools frequently, attending three or more schools since first grade. Of third-graders from low-income families—that is, with incomes below $10,000—30 percent have changed schools frequently, compared with about 10 percent from families with incomes of $25,000 and above (see app. I). About 25 percent of third-graders in inner city schools have changed schools frequently, compared with about 15 percent of third-graders in rural or suburban schools.

An inner city child, compared with one in a suburban or rural school, may be more likely to change schools frequently, in part, because he or she is more likely to come from a low-income family. Another factor that could contribute to an inner city child changing schools is that such a child may move only a short distance, yet move into a new school attendance area; however, a child in a larger, less densely populated school attendance area—for example, in a suburban or rural school district—may move several miles and still attend the same school.

Migrant and LEP children also are much more likely than others to have changed schools frequently: about 40 percent of migrant children have changed schools frequently, compared with about 17 percent of all children. Among LEP children, about 34 percent have changed schools frequently.

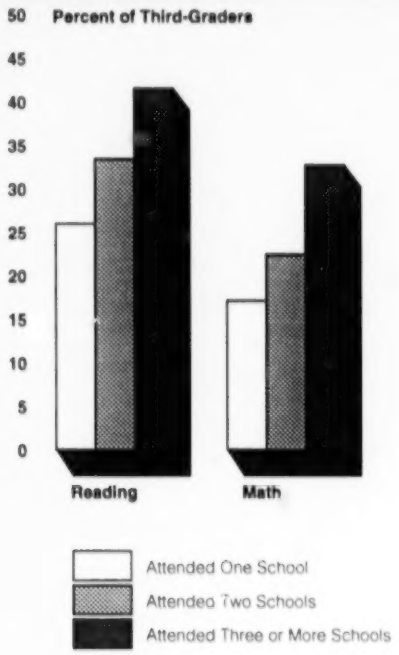
Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Are More Likely to Be Low Achievers and to Repeat a Grade

Of the nation's third-graders who have changed schools frequently, 41 percent are low achievers, that is, below grade level, in reading, compared with 26 percent of third-graders who have never changed schools (see fig. 1). Results are similar for math—33 percent of children who have changed schools frequently are below grade level, compared with 17 percent of those who have never changed schools. In grouping the children who have changed schools frequently into four income categories, we found that within each category, these children are more likely to be below grade level in reading and math than those who have never changed schools[8] (see app. I). Children who have moved often were also more likely to have behavioral problems, according to a recent study.[9]

[8]Unless noted, we did not control for other factors in our analysis.

[9]Children who moved frequently, that is, in the top 10 percent of families surveyed, were 77 percent more likely to have four or more behavioral problems than those with no or infrequent moves. For more information, see David Wood and others, "Impact of Family Relocation on Children's Growth, Development, School Function, and Behavior," Journal of the American Medical Association (Sept. 15, 1993), pp. 1334-38.

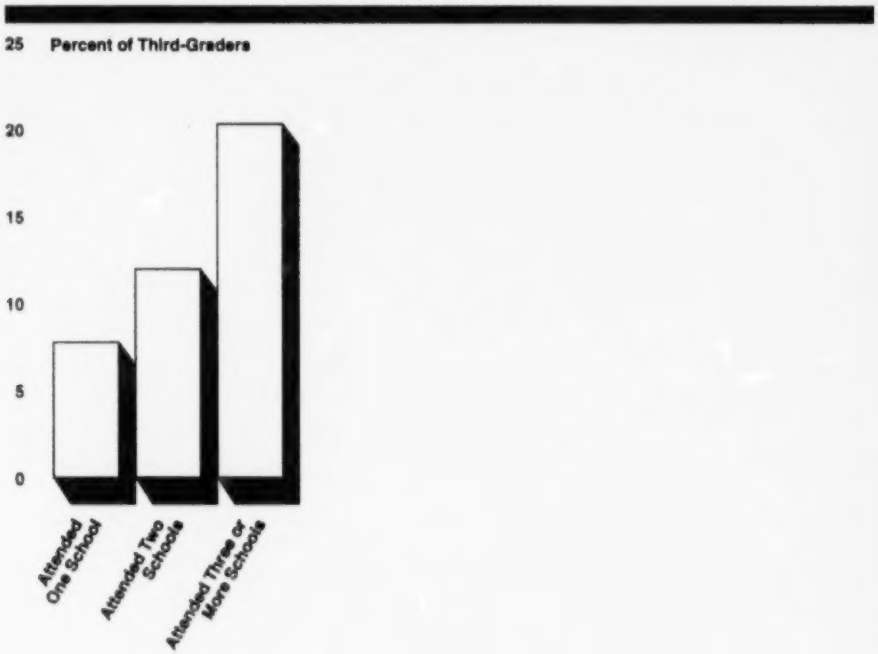
Figure 1: Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Are More Likely to Be Low Achievers in Reading and Math



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Overall, third-graders who have changed schools frequently are two-and-a-half times as likely to repeat a grade as third-graders who have never changed schools (20 versus 8 percent) (see fig. 2). For all income groups, children who have changed schools frequently are more likely to repeat a grade than children who have never changed schools (see app. I).

Figure 2: Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Are More Likely to Repeat a Grade



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Children who have changed schools frequently, compared with children who have never changed schools, are more than twice as likely to have nutrition and health or hygiene problems, according to teachers.[10]

When children changed schools four or more times, both a Department of Education and a Denver Public Schools study found, they were more likely to drop out of school. Children who changed schools four or more times by eighth grade were at least four times more likely to drop out than those who remained in the same school; this is true even after taking into account the socio-economic status of a child's family, according to the Department study.[11] Children who transferred within the district five or

[10]For a discussion of comprehensive school-based programs that may help at-risk children with education and health or behavioral problems, see School-Linked Human Services: A Comprehensive Strategy for Aiding Students at Risk of School Failure (GAO/HRD-94-21, Dec. 30, 1993).

[11]See MPR Associates, "Characteristics of At-Risk Students in NELS:88," Conducted for the National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Department of Education, NCES 92-042 (Aug. 1992), p. 15.

more times dropped out of school at similarly high rates, regardless of reading achievement scores, the Denver study found.[12]

Except for migrant children, little is currently done to help children whose frequent school changes affect the continuity of their schooling. It may be difficult for teachers to focus on the needs of these children, particularly those who enter after school has started, rather than on maintaining continuity for the rest of the class. When children enter classrooms after the beginning of the year, teachers may prejudge them unfavorably.[13] Teachers in schools with high proportions of children who change schools after the beginning of the year indicated that these school changes disrupt classroom instruction, and teachers must spend additional time on noninstructional tasks (see app. II). Teachers may therefore not have the time to identify gaps in such a child's knowledge; moreover, these gaps may grow as the child is left on his or her own to make sense of the new curriculum and its relation to the one at the previous school.[14] Children who changed schools often, except for migrant children, did not receive specialized educational services, researchers have noted.[15]

[12]Ridge A. Hammons and Miles C. Olson, "Interschool Transfer and Dropout: Some Findings and Suggestions," National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin (Sept. 1988), p. 136.

[13]Joan Newman, "What Should We Do About the Highly Mobile Student?," Research Brief (Mount Vernon, Wash.: Educational School District 189, 1988). See also, Carl Sewell, "The Impact of Pupil Mobility on the Assessment of Achievement and Its Implications for Program Planning" (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Community School District 17, 1982).

[14]Andrea A. Lash and Sandra L. Kirkpatrick, "A Classroom Perspective on Student Mobility," The Elementary School Journal (Nov. 1990), pp. 177-91.

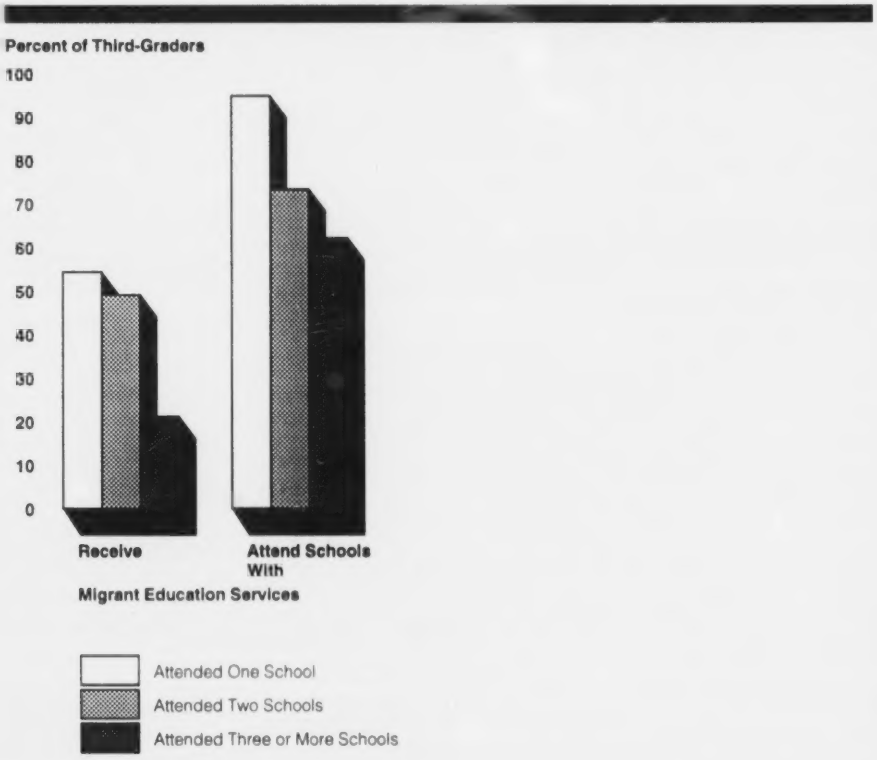
[15]According to our analyses of data from the Research Triangle Institute study and the 1993 Digest of Education Statistics, the number of elementary school children who change schools frequently is about 10 times the total number of migrant children in elementary school. Therefore, the majority of children who change schools frequently are unlikely to receive help.

Migrant Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Are Less Likely Than Those Not Changing Schools to Receive Migrant Education Program Services

Of migrant third-graders who have attended three or more schools since first grade, 21 percent receive migrant services, compared with 54 percent of migrants who have not changed schools at all (see fig. 3).[16] These results are surprising since the Migrant Education Act is intended to address, to a large degree, the problems mobility creates for migrant children. Migrant children who have changed schools frequently are less likely to attend schools with migrant education programs than those who have never changed schools (see fig. 3).

[16]While the Prospects Study data is based on a nationally representative sample of third-graders, the number of migrants in this sample is small and the sample is not representative of the nation's migrants. These factors could affect the magnitude of the difference between migrant children who change schools frequently and those who have not changed schools. According to our analyses, this difference passed standard tests of statistical significance.

Figure 3: Migrant Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Are Less Likely to Receive Migrant Education Services or Attend Schools Offering Services



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Migrant Program Provisions Allow Many Children Who Have Not Changed School Districts Recently to Receive Services

Provisions of the Migrant Education Act allow services to migrant children who have not changed school districts for as many as 6 years.[17] However, migrant children who have changed school districts more recently have greater educational needs than those who have not changed school districts for 3 or more years, according to our analysis of data presented in a study conducted for the Department of Education by Research Triangle Institute (RTI).[18] For example, for reading and language arts, about 50 percent of those who have changed school districts within the last 2

[17]Children who have changed school districts within the year, that is, currently migrant, are eligible for migrant education services. Moreover, they may receive services as formerly migrant children for an additional 5 years, up to a total of 6 years.

[18]Research Triangle Institute, Descriptive Study of the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, Volume I, Study Findings and Conclusions (Research Triangle Park, N.C.: Research Triangle Institute, 1992). Prepared under contract to the U.S. Department of Education.

years fell below the 35th percentile. In comparison, teachers estimated, about 35 percent or less of those who have not changed school districts within the last 3 years fell below the 35th percentile, about what one would expect from an average group of students.[19] Results are generally similar for math.

While states are required to give priority to currently migrant children, these children are less likely to receive either instructional or support services from the Migrant Education Program than children who are formerly migrant (80 versus 85 percent). When we look at instructional services alone, currently migrant children are more likely than formerly migrant children to be served (60 versus 50 percent). However, of all the children who receive instructional services from the Migrant Education Program, the majority (61 percent) are formerly migrant; about half of the formerly migrant children receiving instructional services have not moved within the last 3 years, according to the RTI study (see app. III).

Chapter 1 Participation Rates Lower for Low-Achieving Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Than for Low-Achieving Children Who Have Never Changed Schools

Low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently are less likely to receive Chapter 1 services than low-achieving children who have never changed schools. Of third-graders who have never changed schools and read below grade level, 25 percent receive Chapter 1 reading services. In contrast, 20 percent of third-graders who have changed schools frequently and read below grade level receive these services.[20] In grades kindergarten through 6, approximately 90,000 additional low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently could receive Chapter 1 reading services if the program provided these services at the same rates to these children as to low-achieving children who have never changed schools.

[19]It is clear that (1) children who have changed school districts within the last 2 years are substantially more likely than average to be low achieving and (2) those who have not changed school districts for 3 or more years appear no more likely than average to be low achieving. However, the case is less clear for children who have changed school districts between 2 and 3 years—they are only somewhat more likely than average to be low achieving.

[20]When we excluded those children in schools or grades where Chapter 1 reading services were not available, we found similar differences between the two groups of children: 43 percent of low achievers who have never changed schools receive Chapter 1 reading services compared with 37 percent for those low achievers who have changed schools frequently.

Lack of Chapter 1 Data to Explain the Lower Chapter 1 Participation Rates of Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently

The Department of Education has little information on children who change schools frequently and their participation in the Chapter 1 program, as well as the effects that children moving frequently from school to school have had on Chapter 1 services. Therefore, we were unable to explain why low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently may be less likely to be served by Chapter 1 than low-achieving children who have never changed schools. A 1992 Department of Education policy instructs districts to reserve adequate funds so that migrant children who are eligible for Chapter 1 services—even if they arrive late in the school year—will receive them. But nonmigrant children who change schools frequently and are also eligible for Chapter 1 services are omitted in this policy.

Timely and Comparable Student Record Systems Are One Way to Help Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently, Including Migrants

Without student records containing recent assessment data, classroom placements may not reflect children's needs for services. In some districts with high rates of student mobility, no assessments of late entrants may be conducted because of a lack of staff time, even when no student records are available. For example, one educator, surveyed in a California study, noted that "if a student comes in our busiest time . . . without a transcript, we put her in her age-appropriate class. Sometimes it takes weeks before the teacher realizes a mistake has been made. We simply don't have time to do extensive testing anymore."[21]

According to some researchers, as well as state and district officials, timely and comparable record systems are one way to help children who move frequently, including those served by federal education programs, to better adjust to a new school.[22] Across districts and states, current student record systems vary as to (1) data elements included and (2) how the records are transferred, by mail or electronically. The most commonly used mode of transferring student records—by mail—can be cumbersome and time-consuming. In one state, local officials reported, it often takes 2 to 6 weeks before a new child's records arrive. In a school with a high mobility rate, teachers rarely used student records to place children,

[21]California Student Information System, "A Study of the Feasibility of Implementing a Statewide Process for Electronically Sharing Student Information: Executive Summary," Collaborative Effort by the California Department of Education, the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, and the California Education Data Processing Association (Oct. 1992), p. 5.

[22]See, for example, Andrea Lash and Sandra Kirkpatrick, "A Classroom Perspective on Student Mobility," The Elementary School Journal (Nov. 1990), pp. 177-91; "Highly Mobile Students: Educational Problems and Possible Solutions," ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y. (June 1991); The Project Description of the California Student Information System, California Department of Education (Apr. 13, 1992); and Joan Newman, "What Should We Do About the Highly Mobile Student?" (1988).

teachers we interviewed noted, because these records usually arrived days or weeks after the children transferred or not at all.

The MSRTS, the federal system that tracks migrant children, is slow, incomplete, and used infrequently, according to recent studies.[23] With the MSRTS, records take about 1 week, on average, from the time of a request to the arrival of a hard copy; however, it is not uncommon for records to take up to a month to arrive. Because few school districts are on-line, records must be printed out at the MSRTS center in Little Rock, Arkansas, and mailed to the school districts; sometimes, records must first go through a regional Migrant Education office. Over half of all student records lack test data and, frequently, instructional and health data. School staff working in the Migrant Education Program are much more likely to use records sent from the old school than records from the MSRTS, staff report, primarily because of the small proportion of migrant children in most school districts.

The operation of the MSRTS is expected to be considered this year in conjunction with the reauthorization of the Migrant Education Program of the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988. Public Law 103-59, enacted in August 1993, extended the contract for the operation of the MSRTS until such time as the Secretary of Education determines is necessary, but not later than June 30, 1995. The cost to operate the MSRTS center in Little Rock, Arkansas, averages about $6 million annually; this does not include the cost of data entry and system maintenance at the state and local levels, which has been estimated to be over $9 million annually.

New Record Transfer System Shows Promise

California is one of a few states that have recently begun to pilot an electronic student record format, EXPRESS; it is expected to be used to transfer the records of all children, not just migrants. The format is based on common data standards for transferring student records and was developed by a group of state and local educators with experience in information management; these efforts were funded by the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). With EXPRESS, California officials estimate, the use of these common data standards would reduce the time needed to evaluate the content of a student record—for example, to determine whether a student has taken the

[23]See Research Triangle Institute, Descriptive Study of the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, Volume I, Study Findings and Conclusions (1992). See also, National Commission on Migrant Education, Keeping Up with Our Nation's Migrant Students: A Report on the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS) (Bethesda, Md.: National Commission on Migrant Education, 1991).

equivalent of a certain type of course.[24] The use of ExPRESS to electronically transfer student records may also generate savings by cutting costs of record transfer, retesting, and reimmunization, as well as reporting student data to state and federal agencies. A full evaluation to assess costs and benefits of ExPRESS has not yet been conducted, however, because ExPRESS has only been piloted in a few states and has not been fully implemented in any state. (See app. IV for further details.)

The National Education Goals Panel believes that as states and districts adopt comparable student record systems, (1) educators will be equipped with better data to help children and (2) policymakers will be better able to monitor progress towards the National Education Goals because the progress of all children can be recorded, even that of those who change schools, school districts, or states (see app. IV). To help in monitoring progress towards the goals, the panel has recommended developing a voluntary, uniform state and district record system for children. The panel recommended that the data elements contained in these records be consistent with those developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and NCES. Better student record systems may improve states' and districts' ability to determine whether children who change schools frequently are provided with the help they need, according to the developers of the ExPRESS system.

Conclusions

Children who change schools frequently face many challenges to their success in school. Such change can cause disruption and add to the other challenges—low-income, limited English proficiency, and migrant status—that make learning and achievement difficult for them. Nevertheless, many of the children who change schools frequently may be less likely to receive Migrant Education and Chapter 1 programs services than other children meeting program eligibility standards.

As the nation moves to setting high standards for all children, those who are failing by current standards may be even more likely to fail. How can low-achieving and migrant children who change schools frequently be helped to meet these high standards? One potential help is improved access to Chapter 1 services, for which such children are often eligible but not necessarily served. Another possibility is to better focus Migrant Education Program funding on the migrant children most in need of

[24]California Student Information System, "A Study of the Economic Feasibility of Implementing Electronic Student Record Transfer in California: A Benefit-Cost Analysis," Collaborative Effort by the California Department of Education, the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, and the California Education Data Processing Association, Review Draft (Feb. 6, 1993).

services, for example, migrant children who have changed school districts in the last 2 school years. If funding were more focused on these children, a greater proportion of these children could be served by local migrant education programs or such programs could offer those children most in need more intensive services.

Finally, another potential area of assistance is improved or new student record systems. These systems would not guarantee better delivery of services to children who change schools frequently, but they could help school personnel to make more timely and informed judgements about the services these students need, including those that federal programs might provide. In addition, improved state and local record systems, which are intended to cover all children, could make the existing separate federal record system for migrant children (MSRTS) unnecessary in the long run.

Matters for Congressional Consideration

Given the great educational needs of migrant children who have changed school districts recently, Congress may wish to consider focusing migrant education funding to give higher priority to such children. This could be accomplished, for example, by limiting eligibility for federal Migrant Education Program services only to migrant children who have changed school districts within the last 2 years, rather than continuing program eligibility to formerly migrant children who have not changed school districts for as many as 6 years.

Recommendations to the Department of Education

We recommend that the Department of Education (1) determine the reason(s) for the low Chapter 1 participation rates of low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently and (2) develop strategies so that all eligible children who have changed schools frequently, including migrant children, will have access to Chapter 1 services.

We also recommend that the Department of Education determine the feasibility of using electronic student record systems, such as those currently being adopted by some states and school districts for all students, instead of the MSRTS.

Agency Comments

The Department of Education provided written comments on a draft of this report (see app. V). The Department generally agreed with our recommendation about determining the reason(s) for the low Chapter 1 participation rates of low-achieving children who have changed schools

frequently to ensure that these children receive needed services. It suggested that better record transfer systems may be one way to ensure that school districts provide services to children who enter schools at any time during the school year.

Moreover, the Department generally agreed with our recommendation about developing strategies so that all eligible children, including those who have changed schools frequently, will be selected for services on the same basis. It suggested that its proposals to expand schoolwide Chapter 1 programs and encourage systemic planning at the district level were steps in this direction. We agree that these proposals may help children who change schools frequently. However, because many Chapter 1 schools will not have schoolwide programs, even under the administration's recent proposal, we continue to believe that the Department should develop additional strategies to ensure that low-achieving children who change schools frequently have the same access to Chapter 1 services as other children.

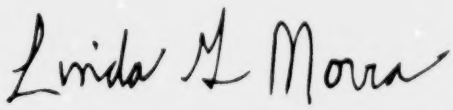
The Department also agreed with our recommendation that it determine the feasibility of replacing the MSRTS with electronic student record systems, such as those currently being adopted by some states and school districts. It also stated that it is currently investigating other options for student record transfer. In our report, we note that little evaluation data exist on the ExPRESS system. In examining the feasibility of ExPRESS, we agree with the Department that other record transfer options, as well as their feasibility, should also be examined.

Although the Department commented that we had identified an important issue—that children who change schools frequently do not receive federally funded services to the same extent as children who do not change schools—it raised a concern about the use of the Prospects Study data to generalize about migrant students. We had recognized that while the Prospects data are based on a nationally representative sample of third-graders, the number of migrants in this sample is generally small and not representative of the nation's migrants. For this reason, we had supplemented our analyses of the Prospects Study data with secondary analysis of data from the RTI study—based on a nationally representative sample of migrants.[25] We also responded to additional technical comments provided by the Department, as appropriate.

[25]Research Triangle Institute, Descriptive Study of the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, Volume I, Study Findings and Conclusions (1992).

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Education, appropriate congressional committees, and other interested parties. If you wish to discuss the contents of this report, please call me on (202) 512-7014. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix VI.

Sincerely,



Linda G. Morra
Director, Education and Employment Issues

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Abbreviations

CCSSO	Council of Chief State School Officers
ExPRESS	Exchange of Permanent Records Electronically for Students and Schools
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
LEP	limited English proficient
MEP	Migrant Education Program
MSRTS	Migrant Student Record Transfer System
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
RTI	Research Triangle Institute

Children Who Change Schools Frequently: Number, Characteristics, Achievement Rates, and Types of Educational Support Received

We analyzed data from the Prospects Study, the Department of Education's longitudinal study of Chapter 1, because it provided data on mobility and other factors. The Prospects Study contained two primary measures of children's mobility: (1) the number of schools attended since starting first grade and (2) the number of times the child changed schools during school year 1990-91. In our analysis of the Prospects database, we focused on the first measure in order to include school changes that may have occurred in previous years. We found that few children changed schools more than once during a school year (see p. 32).

Use of the Prospects Study Database to Analyze Children's Mobility

The Prospects Study includes a national stratified sample of elementary school children in the first, third, and seventh grades. We chose to analyze data on third-graders rather than seventh-graders because the focus of our request was children's mobility in the elementary grades. In addition, using third-graders allowed us to minimize the chances that children would change schools as part of a group, rather than individually. For example, a child may have attended three or more schools by seventh grade because the district puts grades K-3, 4-6, and 7-9 in different schools; a child may, therefore, be changing schools with classmates from the previous grade. Such changes are likely to be less disruptive to the child than those made as a result of a change in school attendance area. Data on children in the first grade would not have allowed us to examine children's mobility in elementary schools in as comprehensive a manner as the data for third-graders.

The Prospects Study, with 15 questionnaires, provides a rich array of data, based on the responses of children, parents, teachers, and school officials. The data were collected using a sample that was stratified by census region and three levels of urbanization.

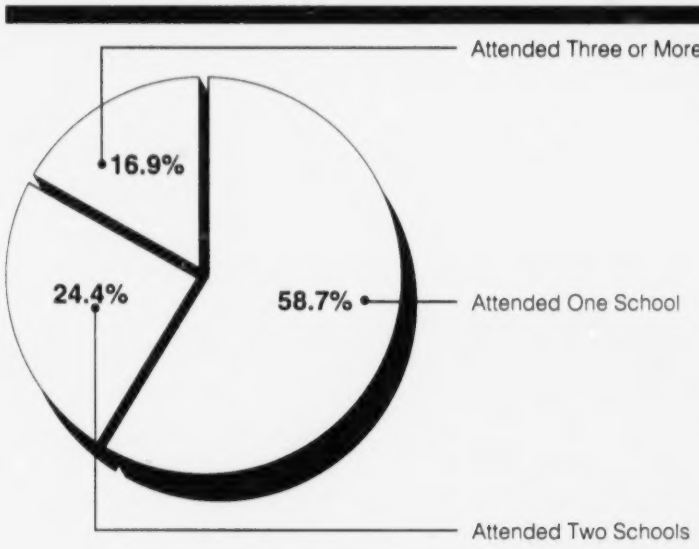
In response to our requests for analyses, the Planning and Evaluation Service, within the Department's Office of the Under Secretary, provided us with crosstabulation tables from the Department's contractor, Abt Associates, based on our specifications. Because the data tape for the study was not available outside of the Department at the time we conducted our analysis, we were unable to conduct multivariate analyses, such as regression. In addition, estimates of sampling errors were not available to us. Overall, we have presented group differences that are relatively large and, according to our analyses, pass standard tests of statistical significance. For our examination of one group whose size was relatively small, that of migrant children, we supplemented our analyses of

the Prospects Study database with analyses based on the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) study of a representative sample of migrant children.[1]

Number and Characteristics of Children Who Change Schools Frequently

We found that about 17 percent of third-graders have changed schools frequently, that is, have attended three or more schools since the beginning of first grade. About one-quarter, or 24 percent, of third-graders have attended two schools; the remaining 59 percent of third-graders have remained in the same school since first grade (see fig. I.1).

Figure I.1: About 17 Percent of All Third-Graders Have Attended Three or More Schools Since First Grade



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

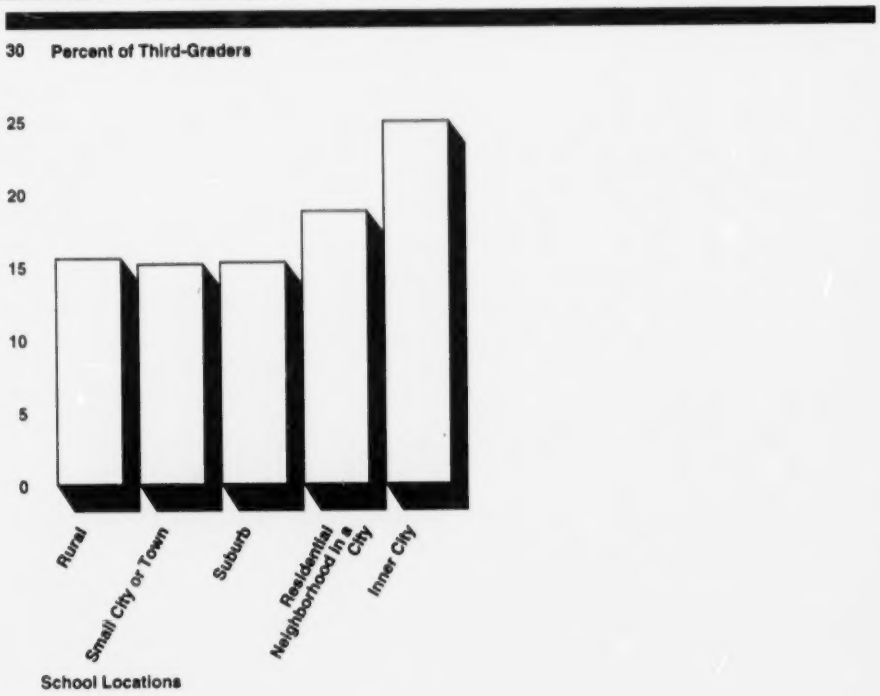
Inner City and Low-Income Children Much More Likely to Change Schools Frequently

Inner city children are much more likely to change schools frequently, on average, than those in rural or suburban areas or in small cities or towns. One-fourth of third-graders in inner city schools have changed schools frequently, that is, have attended three or more schools since first grade. In comparison, only about one-seventh of children from rural or suburban

[1]Research Triangle Institute, Descriptive Study of the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, Volume I, Study Findings and Conclusions (1992).

areas or from small cities or towns have changed schools frequently. (See fig. I.2.)

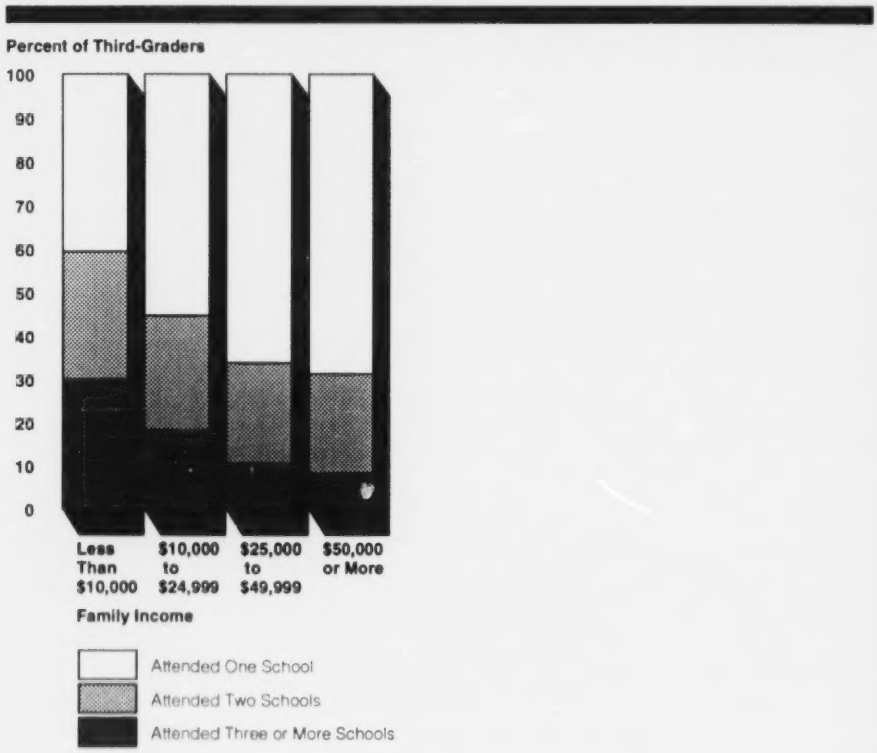
Figure I.2: One-Fourth of Third-Graders Attending Inner City Schools Change Schools Frequently (Have Attended Three or More Schools Since First Grade)



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Children from low-income families are more likely to change schools frequently than those from higher income families. Among children in families with annual incomes below $10,000, 30 percent have changed schools frequently, compared with 8 percent of children in families with incomes of $50,000 or more. Overall, the percentage of children who change schools frequently decreases as income increases. (See fig. I.3.)

Figure I.3: As Family Income Increases, Third-Graders' Likelihood of Changing Schools Frequently Decreases



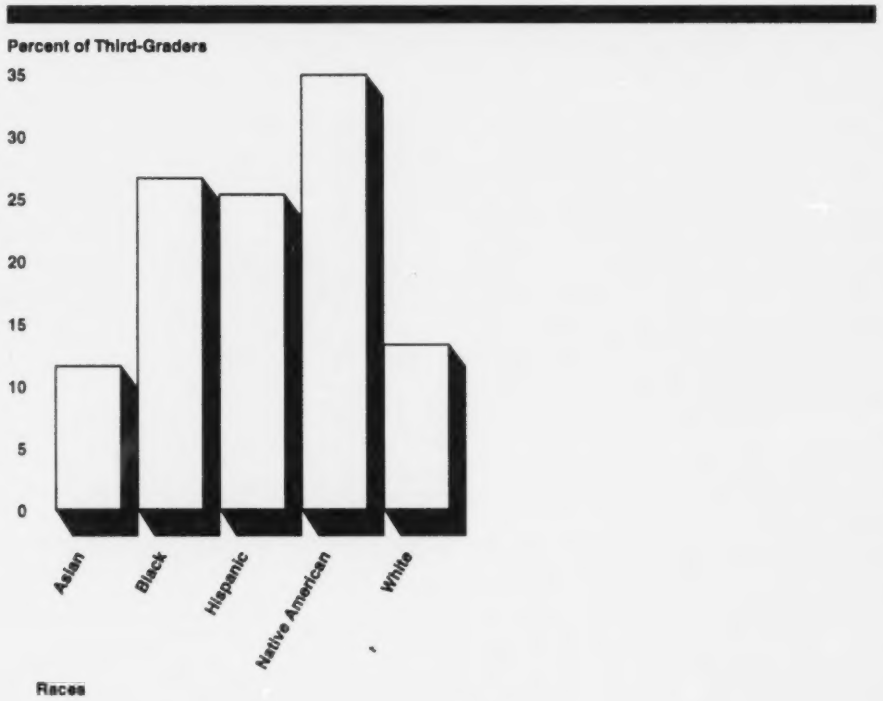
Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Native American, Black, Hispanic, Migrant, and LEP Children More Likely to Change Schools Frequently

Native American, black, and Hispanic children are more likely to change schools frequently than Asian or white children (see fig. I.4). However, these differences are less related to race or ethnicity than to differences in income and, consequently, homeownership versus renter status: renters tend to move much more frequently than homeowners. When we examined 1990 Current Population Survey data reported by the Bureau of the Census, race or ethnic differences in mobility largely disappeared after considering homeownership versus renter status.[2]

[2]In one school district, Rochester, New York, landlords and school officials have begun to work together to decrease the rate of mobility for elementary school children whose parents are renters by (1) providing parents with information about how mobility is related to lower achievement and (2) advertising apartment vacancies by elementary school attendance zone. See also David Schuler, "Effects of Mobility on Student Achievement," ERS Spectrum (Fall 1990), pp. 17-24.

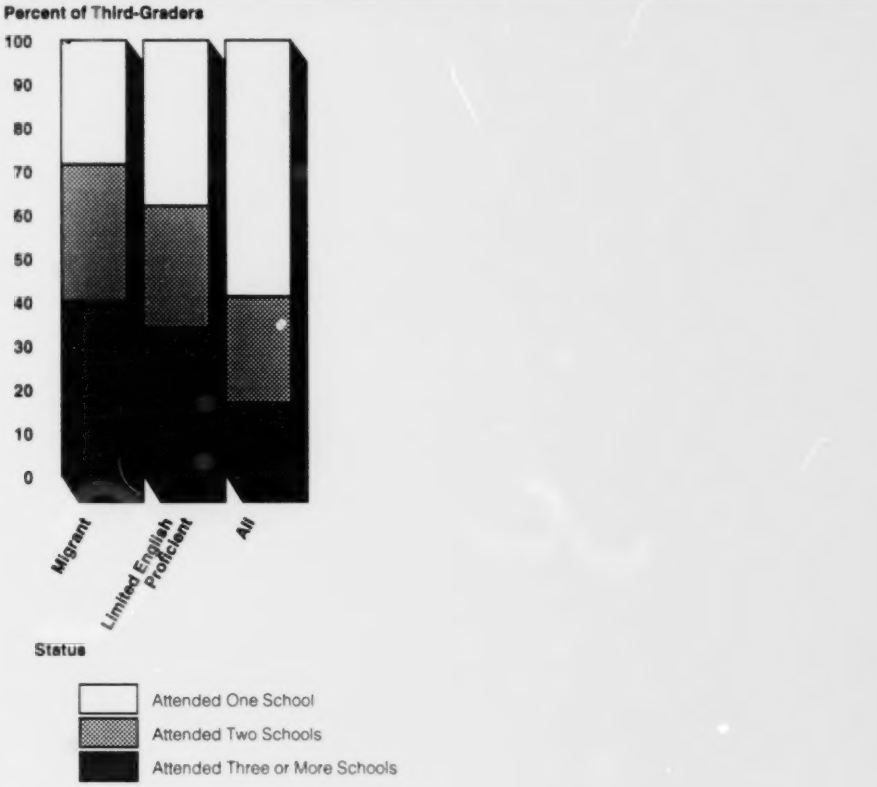
Figure I.4: Third-Graders Who Are Native American, Black, or Hispanic Are More Likely to Change Schools Frequently Than Those Who Are Asian or White



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Migrant and limited English proficient (LEP) children are much more likely to change schools frequently than all children (see fig. I.5). About 40 percent of migrant children and 34 percent of LEP children change schools frequently, in comparison with 17 percent of all children. In addition, compared with 59 percent of all children, a smaller percentage of migrant and LEP children have never changed schools—28 and 38 percent, respectively.

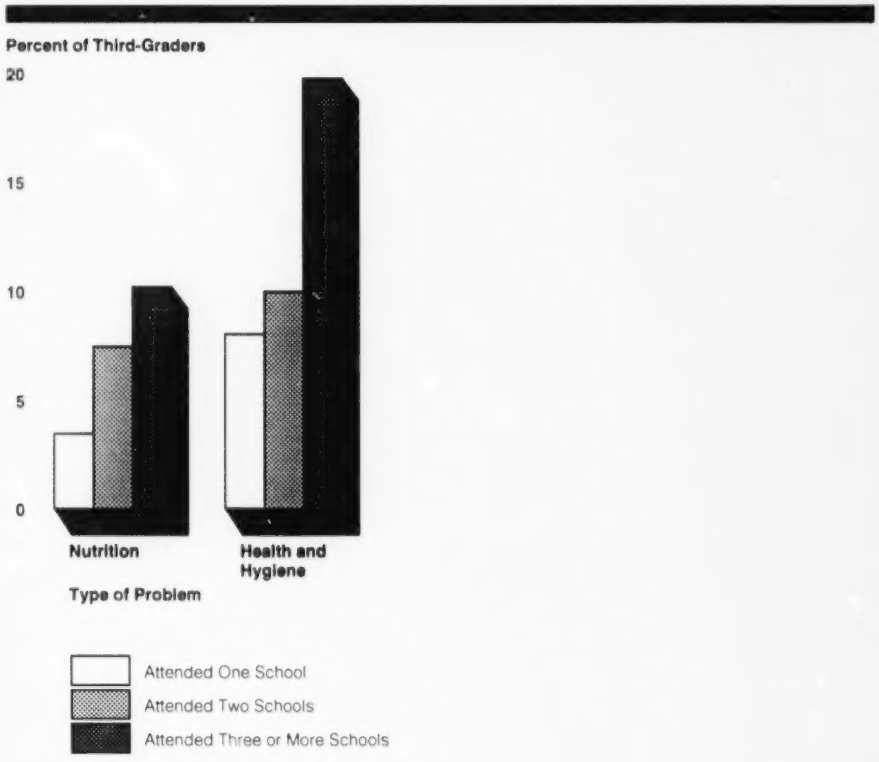
Figure I.5: Migrant and Limited English Proficient (LEP) Third-Graders Are More Likely to Change Schools Frequently Than All Third-Graders



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Teachers reported that children who change schools frequently, compared with those who have never changed schools, are much more likely to have problems related to nutrition or health and hygiene. Among children who change schools frequently, 10 percent are reported to have nutrition problems, compared with about 3 percent of children who have never changed schools. Similarly, teachers report that 20 percent of children who change schools frequently have health and hygiene problems, compared with 8 percent of children who have never changed schools. (See fig. I.6.)

Figure I.6: Third-Graders Who Change Schools Frequently Are More Likely to Have Nutrition or Health and Hygiene Problems

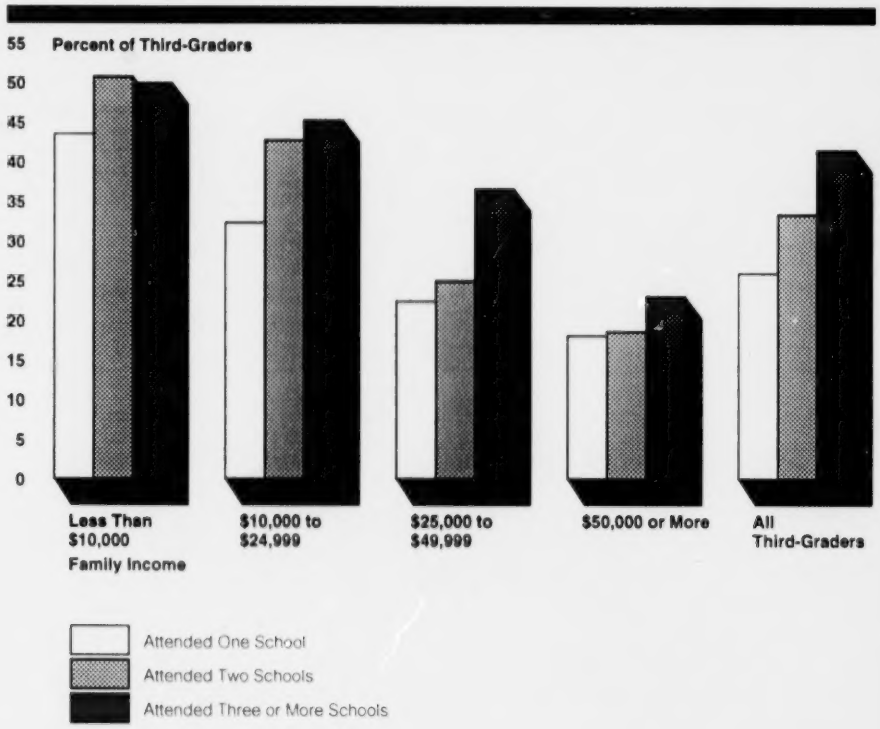


Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Children Who Change Schools Frequently Are More Likely to Be Low Achievers and Repeat a Grade Than Children Who Do Not

Within each income group, children who change schools frequently are more likely to be low achievers—below grade level—in reading than are children who have never changed schools; however, the extent of this difference varies (see fig. I.7). Overall, children from low-income families are more likely to be low achievers than those from higher income families, regardless of the frequency of school changes. The results were generally similar when we analyzed, by income group and number of schools attended, the percentage of children below grade level in math.

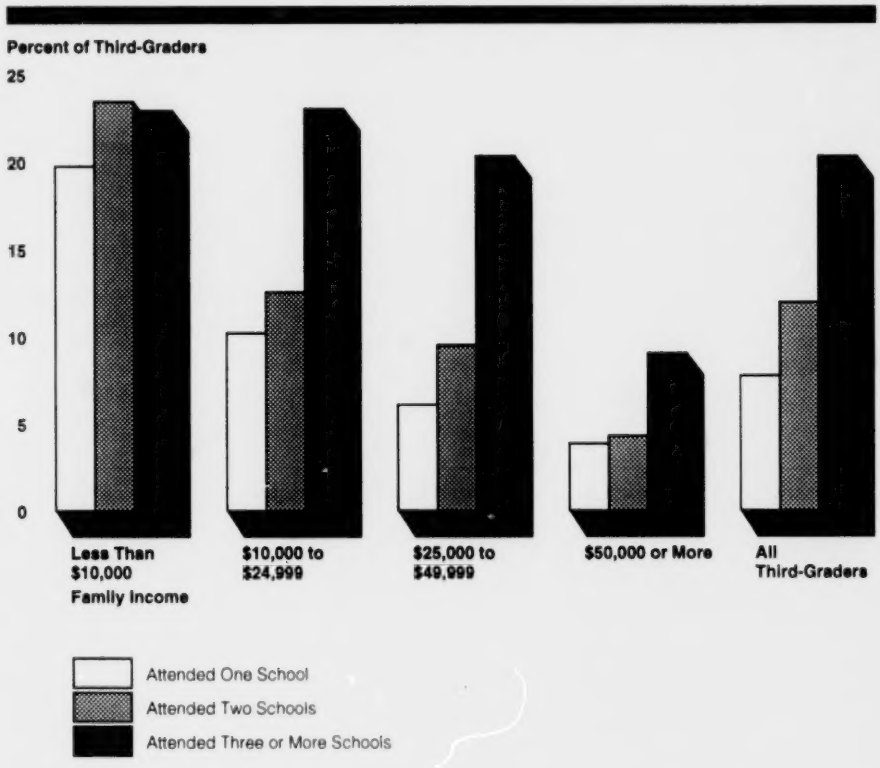
Figure I.7: Third-Graders Who Change Schools Frequently Are More Likely Than Those Who Have Never Changed Schools to Be Below Grade Level in Reading, Regardless of Income



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

For all children, those who have changed schools frequently are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade as those who have never changed schools. Among children who change schools frequently, about 20 percent repeat a grade; in contrast, among children who have never changed schools, about 8 percent repeat a grade. In all income groups, children who change schools frequently are more likely to repeat a grade than children who have never changed schools; however, the results are most striking for those in families with annual incomes above $10,000. (See fig. I.8.)

Figure I.8: Third-Graders Who Change Schools Frequently Are More Likely Than Those Who Have Never Changed Schools to Have Repeated a Grade, Regardless of Income



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

In addition to examining the relationship between children's achievement and the number of schools attended since first grade, we also examined the relationship between children's achievement and the number of times children moved during school year 1990-91. Those children changing schools during the year are more likely to be low achievers than those remaining in the same school; those children changing schools two or more times are more likely to be low achievers than those changing schools once during the year. Few children, however, move two or more times during the year. While about 11 percent of children change schools at least once during the school year, only about 2 percent of children change two or more times. In addition, children are about equally likely to change schools within the district as they are to change schools across

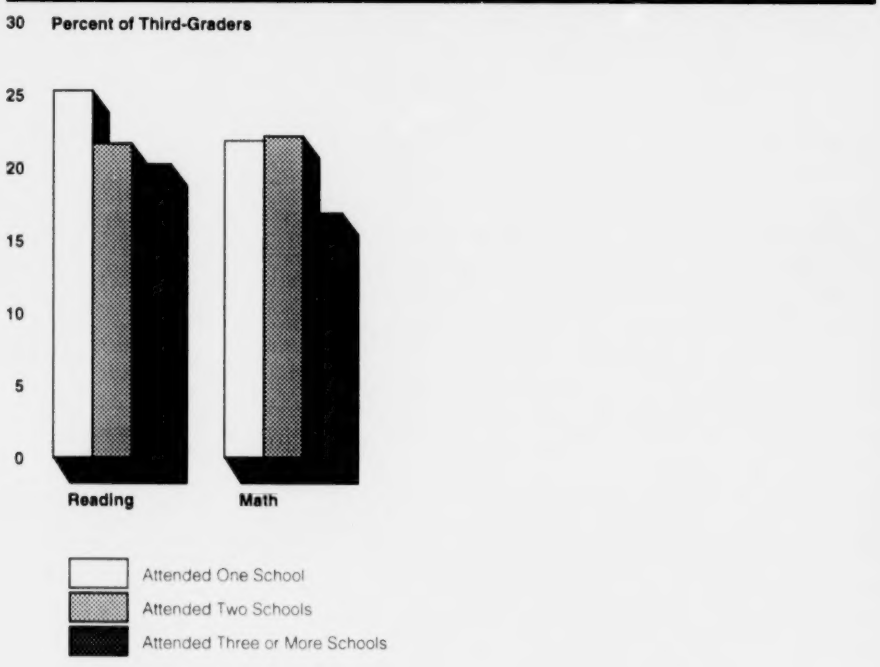
districts. Those children who change schools within the district are slightly more likely to be below grade level in reading than those who change schools across districts; the results are similar for math.[3]

Children Who Change Schools Frequently Less Likely to Receive Support From Federal Education Programs

Children who change schools frequently are less likely to receive educational support from federal programs than those who have never changed schools. For example, migrant children who change schools frequently are less likely to receive migrant education services than those who have never changed schools. In addition, low-achieving children who change schools frequently are less likely to get Chapter 1 services than those low-achieving children who have never changed schools; this is true for children achieving below grade level in math as well as reading. For example, among children who have never changed schools and are below grade level in math, 22 percent receive Chapter 1 math services, compared with 17 percent of those who change schools frequently (see fig. I.9).

[3]One might expect that those students who move across districts will find a greater change in educational environment and, therefore, will be more likely to be low achieving. Those who move within the district, however, may be more likely to have characteristics that increase their likelihood of low achievement, such as being from a low-income family, as was suggested by our case study data. Thus, the net differences in rates of low achievement between the two groups may be small.

Figure I.9: Third-Graders Below Grade Level in Reading and Math Are Less Likely to Receive Related Chapter 1 Services if They Change Schools Frequently



Source: GAO analysis of Prospects Study data.

Case Study of a Maryland School With a High Mobility Rate: Comparison With Similar School in California

In the state of Maryland, we conducted a case study of an elementary school, selected by the district's superintendent, with one of the highest mobility rates within the district for the 1991-92 school year. We interviewed school and district personnel to determine the effects of children's mobility on the school's ability to provide educational services.

We compared our interview results from this case study with those from a case study of a school in California with a high-mobility rate. The California study was conducted by Andrea Lash and Sandra Kirkpatrick,[1] researchers who have examined issues similar to those we examined. We will refer to the school we analyzed as the "Maryland school" and to the school in the study conducted by Lash and Kirkpatrick as the "California school."

Characteristics of the Maryland and California Schools

Maryland School Profile

During the 1991-92 school year, about 31 percent of the Maryland school's children entered after the start of the school year and about 30 percent of the school's children withdrew before the end of the year. A substantial number of the school's children lived in seven apartment complexes, near the boundary lines of the Maryland school district and the District of Columbia. The school serves a student body that is 74 percent black, 10 percent white, 10 percent Asian, and 6 percent Hispanic. Of these children, 56 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. In 1988, the last year that nationally normed standardized tests were administered in Maryland, children in the school generally scored slightly below the national average in reading and above the national average in math. These scores, especially in math, showed improvement over those in earlier years, the principal noted, due to the work of the school staff who, generally, had many years of experience at the school.

The school offers a language instruction program for limited English proficient (LEP) children; the district refers to this program as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This ESOL program, one of about 38 in the district, provides English language instruction to LEP children from 29

[1]For more information, see Andrea Lash and Sandra Kirkpatrick, "A Classroom Perspective on Student Mobility," The Elementary School Journal (Nov. 1990), pp. 177-91.

different countries. Parents can choose whether their children who are LEP will be enrolled in the school for their attendance area or in the school housing the ESOL program for their section of the district. The district's International Student Guidance Office assists parents registering children from other countries and provides parents with information about the availability of social services in the county. This information is available at all schools and is frequently placed in public libraries.

California School Profile

The California school is located in a medium-sized city in a neighborhood composed primarily of rental housing. In the district's spring 1987 report, the student mobility rate for the California school was assessed at 77 percent (this rate represents enrollments and withdrawals expressed as a percentage of the average monthly attendance). The school serves a student body that is approximately 43 percent black, 25 percent Hispanic, 18 percent white, and 13 percent Asian. Of these children, 62 percent are in families that receive funds from Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC). Standardized test scores place the school below the national norm, at all grade levels, in both reading and mathematics.

Interviews With Maryland School and District Personnel and With California Teachers

We conducted interviews at the Maryland school with the principal, one teacher who also served as chairperson of the school-site management team, four classroom teachers, one Chapter 1 teacher, two ESOL teachers, and one counselor. In addition, we interviewed district-level coordinators in the Chapter 1 program and the ESOL program, as well as an official in the Pupil Accounting and School Boundaries Office. In the interviews at the California school, 21 teachers of regular and bilingual classes participated, according to the Lash and Kirkpatrick study.

When comparing the Maryland school with the California school, we found that in both schools, teachers reported similar problems with children's mobility. During the interviews, teachers noted that (1) children change schools throughout the year; (2) children who change schools seldom give notice when enrolling late or withdrawing early from school; (3) changing schools interferes with classroom instruction and increases noninstructional tasks, especially if little advance notice is given as to when children will enter late or withdraw early; (4) schools generally must place children before records arrive and, therefore, may not provide children with needed services; and (5) transfer cards may be helpful if they are timely and accurate.

Children Change Schools Throughout the Year, Though More Frequently at Certain Times

Staff in both schools reported that children change schools throughout the year. For the Maryland school, mobility is higher during the fall and in the spring months. Mobility stabilizes during the winter months, a school official commented, because there are fewer evictions due to local laws preventing them when the temperature drops below zero. According to the California study, enrollment declines between September and December, increases dramatically at the start of the new year, and then declines. Withdrawals were more likely to occur, this study noted, during the first half of the month than during the latter half. In contrast with enrollments, withdrawals were more evenly distributed throughout the school year.

It is common for students to change schools, Maryland school staff said, both within the district and across districts, including to districts located in other states. The school receives a number of children from outside the district and state because (1) it is located in a metropolitan area and (2) other districts in Maryland, as well as those in Virginia and Washington, D.C., are in close proximity.

Children Who Change Schools Seldom Give Notice When Enrolling Late or Withdrawing Early From School

In both the Maryland and California schools, teachers receive little or no notice for children who enroll in school late—after the start of the school year—or who withdraw early—before the end of the year. The Maryland school usually receives no advance notice for new children who enroll late. For early withdrawals, the school generally receives no notice or up to a week's notice. Only three teachers in the California school reported that they have ever received advance notice of a child's enrolling in their classes, and the notice was never more than 1 day in advance. A first-grade teacher at the California school said, "Usually the secretary just appears with the child at the doorway, and that's the first time we know that we have a new child."

Children's Mobility Interferes With Classroom Instruction and Increases Noninstructional Tasks for Teachers

Children's mobility disrupts classroom instruction, teachers interviewed in both schools said; time spent on instruction decreases because teachers must spend additional time on noninstructional tasks. According to teachers in the Maryland school, because teachers are not given advance notice when a new child arrives, the class must be interrupted and instruction delayed. The teacher has to take the time to acclimate the child to the classroom environment and provide him or her with instructional materials and a desk. At the California school, when new children enrolled, they would be assigned to whichever class had the greatest number of empty seats. Because of lack of information about children's

arrivals, teachers said, they did not prepare for new children. If teachers were given even minimal advance notice, the California teachers stated, they could better help a new child to feel more welcome and at ease because the teacher could have a desk and materials ready; this would ease the new child's transition into the classroom, as well as minimize disruption for the rest of the class.

Children's mobility adds to teacher workload by increasing paperwork; the total number of children for whom he or she is responsible may greatly increase. Maryland teachers frequently created new class rosters, they said, and the school was often adding new teachers or creating additional classrooms to accommodate new children. In the California school, teachers were responsible for an average of 39 children; the teachers may have worked with as many as 49 children, over the course of the school year, although the district had a limit of 30 children per classroom.

Schools Generally Must Place Children Without Any Records

Both schools rarely used children's records to place children because these records usually arrived days or weeks after their transfers or not at all. This creates an educational problem because children must be placed immediately, without records, leading to possible inappropriate placements or lack of provision of needed support services. Children's records transferred from another school within the same district take 1 week or less, several teachers in the Maryland school said; records transferred from outside the district take 2 weeks or less or may never arrive.

Timely receipt of children's records would assist in placing children appropriately, school staff noted, and avoid repetitive testing when a child enters late. For the 1993-94 school year, according to a district official, the district plans to facilitate identification of Chapter 1-eligible children using the district's computer system. If a child changes schools in the district, school staff can enter the child's identification number into the computer to determine if he or she is eligible for Chapter 1 services.

The Maryland school district also recently started maintaining a computerized listing of children eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch. These listings would speed up the resumption of services for eligible children, a district official noted, when they move within the district. In the California school, most teachers rarely used information from children's records to place children in appropriate classes, primarily because the records arrived several weeks after the children or not at all.

Transfer Cards Helpful if Timely and Accurate

To provide information to children's new schools in a timely manner, the Maryland school district, at the time of withdrawal, gives children transfer cards that include information such as basic student identification for the current school year; the current instructional program, such as textbooks used and grades; and Maryland competency requirements completed by the child. Such cards may facilitate class placement before receipt of official school records. However, problems may arise because (1) children rarely give notice to the school before withdrawing and often leave the school without a transfer card or (2) the school does not accurately complete the card.

Although schools may rarely fail to accurately complete the transfer card, this failure may have serious consequences when it does occur. For example, after moving, one LEP child was inappropriately enrolled in a new middle school, a Maryland district official said, because his transfer card did not note his eligibility for ESOL services. The school identified his need for ESOL services only after a month of the child's nonparticipation in classes. School staff then discovered that he should never have been withdrawn from his previous school because it provides ESOL services to LEP children enrolled in his new attendance area, as well as in his previous attendance area.

Federal Education Programs for Children Who Change Schools Frequently: Some Aspects May Hinder Delivery of Services

Some federal education programs serve migrant children and low-achieving children in high-poverty schools who may also change schools frequently. These federal programs provide educational and support services through formula allocations to states and localities. They include (1) the Migrant Education Program (MEP), the term we use to refer to Part D, Subpart 1, Chapter 1 of Title I of the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, and (2) Chapter 1, the term we use to refer to Part A, Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies, of Chapter 1.

Migrant Education Program

To examine factors affecting the provision of migrant education services to mobile students, we reviewed descriptive information about, and recent evaluations of, the MEP. The reports we reviewed suggested some concern about whether "currently migrant" students, when compared with the "formerly migrant," had been given sufficient priority by the program in the distribution of migrant education services. As defined earlier in this report, "currently migrant" refers to children of migrant workers who have moved from one school district to another within the most recent 12-month period. Those migrant children who have not changed districts within this 12-month period, but have changed districts within the previous 5 years, are the "formerly migrant." Approximately two-thirds of the currently migrant children who received MEP services during the regular school year have moved between states.

Migrant Education Program Provides Education and Support Services to Children of Migrant Workers

The MEP was funded under Chapter 1, of the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, at $302.8 million for fiscal year 1993. The program provides formula grant funds to states; these funds are to be used for supplementary education and support services in meeting the educational needs of migrant children whose parents are migratory agricultural workers or fishers. The MEP funds are used to provide academic, remedial, bilingual and multi-cultural, and vocational instruction. The most prevalent MEP instructional services are supplementary instruction, that is, in addition to that which would already be provided, in reading and other language arts, as well as in mathematics. Children generally receive MEP instructional services for about 4 hours a week during approximately 32 weeks of the regular school year. In addition, to assist in providing instructional continuity, the program provides career education, special guidance counseling, testing services, health and nutrition services, preschool programs, and the

tracking of students' educational and health records through the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS).

Funds are allocated through a formula, based on the following: (1) for a calendar year, number of eligible, full-time-equivalent migrant children, aged 3 through 21, residing within each state, and (2) the state's average per-pupil expenditure. Eligible migrant children comprise about 1 percent of the public elementary and secondary school children in the nation.

Needs Greater for Children Who Are Currently Migrant or Those Who Have Changed School Districts Within the Last 2 Years

The needs of currently migrant children, as well as those of formerly migrant children who have changed school districts within the last 2 years, are substantially greater than those of formerly migrant children who have not changed school districts as recently, according to data presented in a major study of the MEP conducted by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI).[1] The study reported the percentage of migrant children in the regular school year program who exhibited eight indicators of need, by number of years since the child last changed school districts. The following are the eight indicators of need: achieving below the 35th percentile in reading, achieving below the 35th percentile in language arts, achieving below the 35th percentile in math, being one or more grades behind grade level, frequent absences, eligibility for regular Chapter 1 assistance, eligibility for free and reduced price meals, or exhibiting severe behavioral problems, as reported in the RTI study. Currently migrant children are twice as likely to show five or more of the eight indicators of need as those formerly migrant children who have not changed school districts in the last 5 years. Currently migrant children have more or different academic needs, local project coordinators reported, because of a lack, or discontinuity, in their education.

Our examination of these data suggest that formerly migrant children remaining in the same school district for 3 or more years may not have a need for the instructional services provided by the MEP. Migrant children who have not changed school districts within the last 3 years do not appear to be disproportionately likely to be low achievers, according to our analysis of the data reported in the RTI study. For reading and language arts, about 50 percent of those who have changed school districts within the last 2 years, on average, fall below the 35th percentile. In comparison, teachers estimated, about 35 percent or fewer of those who have not changed school districts within the previous 3 years fall below the 35th

[1]Research Triangle Institute, Descriptive Study of the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, Volume I, Study Findings and Conclusions (1992), pp. 28-31.

percentile, about what would be expected from an average group of children.[2] Results are generally similar for math.

Migrant children, including those who have not changed school districts recently, are, however, likely to have other characteristics that put them at risk educationally. These include a greater likelihood of being poor or LEP, as well as greater needs for support services, according to their teachers and local coordinators of MEP projects. Such needs could make them eligible for other programs.

Formerly Migrant Children Receiving MEP Benefits Outnumber Currently Migrant Children Receiving Such Benefits

Formerly migrant children who receive MEP services far outnumber those who are currently migrant, despite the greater needs of the currently migrant. Of the migrant children served during the regular school year, about 279,000 (or 61 percent) are formerly migrant compared with about 176,000 (or 39 percent) who are currently migrant. About half of those who are formerly migrant have not changed school districts in the last 3 years. In addition, about 89,000 formerly migrant children receive services in summer-term projects, compared with about 72,000 who are currently migrant.[3]

While the law requires states to give priority to currently migrant children, they are less likely to receive migrant education services (that is, either instructional or support services) in school-year migrant education programs than those who are formerly migrant (80 versus 85 percent). Despite the greater needs of more recent migrants, in allocating funds to states, the MEP funding formula does not differentiate between currently and formerly migrant children.

Analysis of participation rates, by type of services provided by the MEP, shows that currently migrant children are more likely than the formerly migrant to receive instructional services during the regular school year (60 versus 50 percent); formerly migrant children are more likely than the currently migrant to receive support services during the regular school year (79 versus 73 percent), according to the RTI study. In the study, the major MEP support services listed included medical and dental screening

[2]Children who have changed school districts within the last 2 years are substantially more likely than average to be low achieving, and those who have not changed schools for 3 or more years appear no more likely than average to be low achieving. However, children who have changed school districts between 2 and 3 years are only somewhat more likely to be low-achieving than average students—42 percent fall below the 35th percentile in reading and 37 percent fall below in language arts, according to the RTI study.

[3]Research Triangle Institute, Descriptive Study of the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, Volume I, Study Findings and Conclusions (1992), p. 13.

and treatment, home-school liaison, and guidance counseling, among others.

Use of First-Come, First-Served Basis to Enroll Children in Migrant Projects May Put Some Currently Migrant Children at a Disadvantage

In MEP projects that cannot serve all children, the practice of serving first those children who arrive first may put currently migrant children at a disadvantage in obtaining services in school-year and summer projects. Of those directors of regular school-year projects reporting that some children were not being served because the classes they needed were full, about 21 percent noted that children who arrived first received priority, as stated in the RTI report. The remaining 79 percent indicated that first priority for such classes was given to currently migrant children or those with the greatest educational needs. Almost all summer project directors noted that when not all children could be served, children were served on a first-come, first-served basis.

Currently Migrant Children Cost More to Recruit

School districts, states, and regional offices are responsible for identifying and recruiting migrant children. When a school determines a student is migrant, his or her name is sent to a recruiter in the MEP office and eligibility is determined. For currently migrant children, recruiters may need to go to the migrant labor camp locations to recruit children for the program; still, not all eligible children are identified. For children who are formerly migrant, recruiters maintain a list, determine migrant eligibility, and recertify the children. It takes less staff time and, therefore, it is less costly to identify formerly, rather than currently, migrant children.

Chapter 1 Program

Services Intended for Low-Achieving Children in High-Poverty Schools

Chapter 1 provides financial assistance to local school districts in order to serve low-achieving children in high-poverty schools. Such schools are more likely to have relatively higher rates of student mobility. The goal of Chapter 1 is to provide supplementary instructional services to children so that they will later be able to succeed in the regular classroom without such services.

The Chapter 1 program is the largest federal elementary and secondary education program; in fiscal year 1993, the federal appropriation for the program was over $6.1 billion for supplementary education services to

states and school districts. Program funds are allocated to states through a statutory formula based on (1) each state's per-pupil expenditure for education and (2) the number of eligible children in each county. States allocate funds to school districts based on the number of poor children in the district. Children are selected by local school officials to participate in Chapter 1 programs—if available in their schools and grade levels for the subjects in which they are low achieving, for example, reading or math—on the basis of low achievement, as measured by standardized tests or teacher judgement.

Reasons Why Children Who Change Schools Frequently Are Less Likely to Receive Chapter 1 Services Have Not Been Determined

Department of Education officials did not have any information on the relation between student mobility and the likelihood of receiving Chapter 1 services. Officials did note, however, that the program did not include any provisions related to receipt of services to address mobility. The Department also did not have any information that might shed light on possible reasons for differences, in the likelihood of receiving Chapter 1 services, between low-achieving children who change schools frequently and low-achieving children who have never changed schools. The reasons do not appear to be related to whether children who change schools frequently attend schools with Chapter 1 programs. We found that low-achieving third-graders who change schools frequently are almost as likely to attend schools with Chapter 1 programs as those who have never changed schools, even though the former are less likely to receive services. This was true for children who were low achievers in either reading or math.

Regular Chapter 1 Services Are More Likely to Be Provided to Formerly, Rather Than to Currently, Migrant Children

Migrant children who are low achievers may be eligible to receive regular Chapter 1 services, as are other children. However, despite their lower achievement, currently migrant children are less likely to receive regular Chapter 1 services than formerly migrant children (20 percent versus 26 percent), according to the RTI study. Reasons school personnel gave for children's nonparticipation in the regular Chapter 1 program differed for currently and formerly migrant children. Formerly migrant children were more likely than currently migrant children to have test scores that were too high. Currently migrant children were more likely than formerly migrant children to be nonparticipants because the Chapter 1 program was not being offered in the child's school or the child was enrolled in the MEP.

The RTI study also asked MEP coordinators if there were any local or state policies or practices that limited the participation of migrant children in other school programs. While the data were sparse, RTI reported a few statements as examples that provide other reasons to explain why migrant children were sometimes excluded from programs such as regular Chapter 1. These include (1) too many children for the available services, (2) testing dates or procedures that prevent some children who arrive after a certain point in the school year from receiving certain services, and (3) allowance not being made for delayed entrance into certain classes. These statements may help to explain why low-achieving children who change schools frequently, in general, are less likely to be served by regular Chapter 1 than those who have never changed schools. The Department established a policy, in 1992, that directs districts to reserve adequate funds so that migrant children who are eligible for Chapter 1 will receive services even if they arrive well into the school year. However, Department policy does not extend to all mobile children, only those who are migrant.

Proposed Student Record System: Improved Timeliness and Comparability Could Facilitate Delivery of Services to Mobile Children, Including Migrant Children

The National Education Goals Panel was established in 1990 to assess and annually report on the progress of the states toward achieving the six National Education Goals. To help in achieving some of these goals, the panel has recommended the development of a voluntary, uniform state and district record system for children. The panel recommended that the data elements contained in these records be consistent with those developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers, under contract to the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The panel noted that at the state level, such a system would allow for the collection of accurate and comparable data on school completers and dropouts. Such data are needed to measure progress towards the national goal to increase the high school graduation rate, as well as other goals related to increasing academic achievement. The panel expects that the proposed system, if adopted, would give districts the ability to track children who change schools, whether within or across states.

Such a system, the panel also stated, would provide educators with information about children's experience as they move through school; this information, along with educators' enhanced capacity to process information, would improve their ability to make appropriate educational decisions. This proposed system would include student records that are cumulative, from prekindergarten to high school graduation. Such a cumulative system may help to ensure that mobile children are provided with needed services since each school change that a child makes, as well as the need for services, can be recorded.

The expected benefits of a cumulative student record system could be greater for mobile children than for others since they are more likely to fall through the cracks and less likely to receive needed services. One member of the goals panel staff noted that to diminish the correlation between mobility and dropping out of school, these cumulative records could be used to identify mobile student's potential need for dropout prevention services.

Comparable Data and Formats Within and Across States Generally Do Not Exist

Student records, transferred both within and across states, include different data elements and are kept in different formats, that is, arrangements of data. A data element is the most basic level of information contained in a student record; examples of data elements that are demographic include a student's sex or date of birth. Of the 47 states responding to a survey conducted for the National Education Goals Panel, only 7 currently have student record systems that are comparable across

districts within a state, although an additional 29 are considering implementing such systems.[1]

In general, among districts in states without comparable record systems, there are many differences in data elements and format. These differences add to a district's administrative burden because the district has to evaluate, translate, and reenter data for children from other districts into its own data elements and format.

If records are to be exchanged electronically across states, common data elements and a standard format are needed among states, as well as for districts within states. This is important given that many children transfer across states during their elementary and secondary school years.

Comparable Student Record System Currently Being Developed

If comparable student records are to be exchanged among the nation's schools, three tasks must be accomplished: (1) common data elements must be determined, (2) a standard format must be developed, and (3) the standard format must be adopted in school districts within states and across states. At the present time, the first two tasks have been largely completed, but state and local adoption of a standard format has begun in only a few states.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), with support from a task force of state and local educators and under contract to the Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), developed a handbook of common data elements, a thorough and comprehensive description of terms and definitions for student data elements. A group of state and local educators, with financial support from NCES, developed a standard format used to arrange, or set up a file structure for, these common data elements; it is known as the ExPRESS (Exchange of Permanent Records Electronically for Students and Schools) format.[2] This format, because it is standard, enables districts to more easily send, receive, and interpret student records transferred from other districts. The American National Standards Institute, the governing establishment for approving standards for the electronic transmission of standard documents, approved the ExPRESS format as the standard for electronic student records. The task force worked to make sure that the format includes key information for prekindergarten, elementary, and secondary

[1]For more information, see Aaron Pallas, "Statewide Student Record Systems: Current Status and Future Trends," National Education Goals Panel Report 92-02 (Mar. 26, 1992).

[2]In recent years, CCSSO has provided staff support for ExPRESS.

student records and that the format is appropriate for schools, school districts, and state education agencies.[3]

Using the standard common data elements and format for organizing student record data, a technical planning subgroup[4] for the National Education Goals Panel identified those common data elements that could be used to create indicators to measure progress toward the national goals. In developing these elements, the subgroup aimed to balance the issue of need for data with availability and feasibility. Such data would be aggregated across schools and districts to measure, throughout the decade, state and local progress towards achieving the six National Education Goals.

Standard Format Could Improve Comparability, Timeliness, and Efficiency of Student Record Transfer

Using a standard format such as the ExPRESS system[5] could provide (1) comparability of student information between districts, (2) timeliness in transferring student records, and (3) efficiency in use of resources, such as staff time. The standard format may help to provide comparability while at the same time allowing each school district many choices about how to keep student information for its own purposes. This comparability is made possible as a result of software, available from several companies, which allows the sending district to translate data from a nonstandard to a standard format. Similarly, for incorporating data into the student record system, the software may be used to translate data received into the receiving school's format.

The use of ExPRESS to electronically transfer student records may also generate savings by cutting costs of record transfer, retesting, and reimmunization. A cost analysis, conducted by the California Department of Education and the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, estimates that by using the ExPRESS format, sending an

[3]A parallel system to ExPRESS has been developed by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers for post-secondary institutions and is known as SPEEDE (Standardization of Postsecondary Education Electronic Data Exchange). The two systems have been designed to be compatible so that student information can be exchanged between school districts and post-secondary institutions.

[4]This was one of a number of temporary work groups commissioned by the goals panel and comprised of technical experts who work on a detailed task and disband after the task is accomplished.

[5]The ExPRESS system in the states and districts includes two components: (1) standard formats, as well as related processes, to request and acknowledge receipt of student data and (2) the electronic means for transmitting the data. Funded by NCES, a task force of educators developed the first component; because various means of transmitting data currently exist, including electronic networks available commercially or through the states, the task force did not need to develop the second component.

electronic transcript may be about one-fourth of the cost of sending a transcript by mail, a substantial savings. Given that California alone currently spends about $13 million a year to transfer student records, an electronic student record system could generate substantial savings, according to the cost analysis. Developers of the system estimate that savings will be generated even if a sizeable portion of the state's districts do not adopt ExPRESS. They also estimate that ExPRESS will substantially reduce the cost of unnecessary reimmunizations or other costs related to searching for lost immunization records, which are currently substantial because almost half of entering transfer students fail to produce immunization records required by the state prior to enrollment. In addition, current student record systems require rekeying of student information. The ExPRESS system aims to prevent rekeying of student data, thus reducing possible errors.

ExPRESS System Is Being Piloted in California

The California state pilot of the ExPRESS system consisted, in total, of seven school districts and six regional migrant education offices. These participants electronically exchanged sample student data between September and October of 1993. Project staff expect that they will have 100 school district users of ExPRESS by the end of November 1994 and 500 users by the end of November 1995.

About three-quarters of California districts responding to a survey used to study the feasibility of implementing this system reported that (1) an electronic record transfer system would be more beneficial than burdensome, (2) they could be ready to participate in 1 to 2 years, and (3) it takes about 2 to 6 weeks for student records to arrive using the current paper-based system. With ExPRESS, the project director noted, student records can be sent and received in about a day. One principal of a high-mobility school noted, "If I could just have immunization records sent electronically, I would be able to register children and get them into the school program so much more quickly."

The project director of the California pilot of ExPRESS suggests that educational services for children, especially mobile children, will improve with the use of ExPRESS in three ways. First, the sooner the information is available to teachers and administrators, the sooner they can respond to a child's needs. Second, a child's self-confidence improves when teachers and administrators have a better sense of his or her needs. Third, when it takes less time to do paperwork, teachers and other school personnel can spend the additional time directly helping children, for example, making

adjustments to new schools easier. The director added that ExPRESS would probably have the greatest benefits for schools with high proportions of mobile children.

Automated Districts, Using Savings From Lower Record Transfer Costs, May Be Able to Pay for Start-Up Costs Within 5 Years

Districts that have already automated their record transfer systems are expected to recover the start-up costs associated with implementing ExPRESS in less than 5 years, according to the analysis conducted by the Far West Laboratory and the California Department of Education; after this period, net savings are anticipated. However, the costs of implementing ExPRESS in nonautomated districts are expected to outweigh the benefits for at least 5 years, because they must make an initial investment in additional computer equipment; the analysis did note, however, that there may be other benefits to becoming automated. To facilitate the adoption of ExPRESS in the beginning, the costs for technical assistance at the state and regional levels may increase, although the total costs of transferring student records are expected to decrease over time.

Information on dropouts may improve and state-reporting burdens may be eased as a result of ExPRESS, according to the California project director. ExPRESS would enable districts to report more accurate dropout rates by identifying where students have transferred or whether they have dropped out of school. Although students who drop out of school may not inform the school district, California officials would be able to obtain basic information from a student directory that would allow them to obtain information on whether a student had enrolled in another school district in the state, according to current plans. ExPRESS could also be used to streamline state and federal reporting requirements by making it easier to aggregate and report student data; such streamlining may help school districts that find the state's 44 paper reporting requirements tedious. ExPRESS may also be used to exchange data between school districts and social service agencies; the project director believes that this will be an improvement over the current paper-based system and may enable more comprehensive services to be provided to children.

Los Angeles District Pilots ExPRESS as a Way to Send Records to the Migrant Student Record Center

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the country, consists of 650,000 children, of whom approximately 12,000 are migrants. LAUSD has already begun its pilot of ExPRESS in order to send migrant student records to the MSRTS center in Little Rock, Arkansas. The ExPRESS system, a district official noted, was more timely and efficient than the current system used to transfer migrant

records. The pilot resulted in a savings in operating expenses because less staff time was spent reentering migrant student data into the center's student record system.

As with the implementation of many new systems, further work was needed to resolve technical shortcomings. Staff working on the pilot had to make modifications to the ExPRESS format to make it compatible with the way the MSRTS center needed to receive the data. This was necessary because the center was not able to allocate the programming time necessary to make it possible to receive the records in the original ExPRESS format because the Department of Education did not allow the center to make substantial changes. This was because of the Department's plan to recompete for the center's contract.

ExPRESS Activity in Other States

The State Department of Education in Florida has conducted a pilot of the ExPRESS system for sending student records electronically; Florida plans to have all districts use the ExPRESS system within the next few years. School officials in Florida and California plan to be able to exchange records within a year. Plans to implement ExPRESS are also under way in Washington and Arizona. As other states implement the ExPRESS system, transfer of comparable student records can take place across, as well as within, states. While they have not yet exchanged electronic student records between school districts, a few districts in the states of Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas (1) have used this electronic system to send student transcript data to some postsecondary institutions attended by large numbers of the districts' graduates or (2) are currently conducting such pilots. Other states have expressed an interest in further evaluating this system.

Concerns About Confidentiality

Concerns have frequently been expressed about the problem of confidentiality if ExPRESS is used to electronically transfer student data. The federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 dictates the content, use of, and access to student record data. Those expressing concern fear that (1) the use of computers may make it more likely that confidentiality laws will be violated and (2) student information will be accessed by parties other than school districts. Proponents of ExPRESS suggest that by incorporating security procedures, computers may provide more effective ways to safeguard student data than those available under a paper-based system, which uses the mail. In addition, these proponents note, using the ExPRESS system, student records can be sent directly to staff

at the school level, those who would receive these records under a paper-based system. California is currently reexamining its records policies to determine possible ways to better ensure confidentiality of student records, while at the same time trying to improve the targeting of services to those children who need them.

Little Evaluation Data on the ExPRESS System Currently Available

Caution may be appropriate about the expected benefits of the ExPRESS system, since little evaluation data are currently available. Although a preliminary evaluation of the ExPRESS system pilot in California was completed in December 1993, early results provide little evidence of statewide impact. Currently available information about estimated benefits is based on expected outcomes—for example, reductions in the number of children for whom immunization data are unavailable or the time spent rekeying data—rather than on large-scale evaluations of actual operations. It will be some time before these types of evaluations can be made.

Comments From the Department of Education

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Ms. Linda G. Morra
Director, Education and
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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

JAN 18 1994

Dear Ms. Morra:

The Secretary has asked that I respond to your request for comments on the GAO draft report, "Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education" (GAO/HRD-94-45), which was transmitted to the Department of Education by your letter of December 14, 1993.

GAO has identified an important issue: that those children who move frequently to different school attendance areas do not receive the federally funded services to the same extent as children who remain in the same school for the entire school year. While the use of the Prospects data to generalize about migrant students is not sound, the general findings that GAO has assembled on mobile children point to a disturbing concern.

The Department has dealt with this issue in reauthorization, particularly through our proposal to expand schoolwide programs, which would provide schools serving high concentrations of poor children with the flexibility to serve all children in the school, regardless of their date of enrollment. Indeed, as your report indicates, highly mobile children are likely to come from low-income families and are likely to attend high-poverty schools.

GAO Recommendation

The GAO recommends that the Department of Education determine the reason(s) for the low Chapter 1 participation rates of low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently.

Response

The Department believes that it is necessary to develop better mechanisms to ensure that these children receive needed services. Such procedures could include procedures for tracking students from school to school, transferring their educational records, and developing strategies to ensure that LEAs provide services to children who enter schools any time during the school year. The Department is already working on determining what record transfer systems might be better than the Migrant Student Record Transfer System.

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GAO Recommendation

Develop strategies so that all eligible children who have changed schools frequently, including migrant children, will have access to Chapter 1 services.

Response

The Department believes that mobile children should be selected to be served on the same basis as other children. Again, our proposal to expand schoolwide programs will help to ensure that they are served on an equitable basis. Moreover, the Department's proposal, as part of its Goals 2000 initiative, to encourage systemic planning at the school district level that is tied to challenging standards will also help to ensure that a school's entire program meets the needs of its mobile students.

GAO Recommendation

The GAO recommends that the Department of Education determine the feasibility of replacing the MSRTS with electronic student record systems, such as those currently being adopted by some states and school districts.

Response

The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department is currently investigating options for student record transfer. SPEEDE EXPRESS, as discussed in your report and in the enclosed material, is one of those options. We believe that other sources may be worth considering as well. The enclosed paper, prepared recently for the Department, under contract to Westat, Inc., should provide useful information regarding other record transfer options.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. I and members of my staff are prepared to respond if you or your representatives have any questions.

Sincerely,

Thomas W. Payzant
Assistant Secretary

Enclosures

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